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Literature research into the effects of using ex-prisoners as 'role models'

Summary

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Summary

In this report, we present the results of a study that was aimed at investigating the potential effects of using ex-prisoners or other 'negative role models' in educational and prevention programmes for young people. Both within and outside of the Netherlands, educational and prevention programmes are regularly conducted in which ex-offenders are used to inform young people and school students about the dangers and consequences of problematic behaviour and crime. Such a method in the Netherlands is the educational programme youth (EPJO), that provided almost 200 lessons at schools in Amsterdam and The Hague in the past school year. The effect on young people of using ex-offenders in programmes such as EPJO is unclear. Therefore, the aim of the current study was to examine to what extent educational and prevention programmes for young people, in which ex-prisoners or others who have been in contact with the judiciary system ('negative role models'), are effective in preventing or reducing delinquent behaviour.

Research questions

The central research questions were formulated as follows:

- 1) What is known about the effects of using ex-prisoners and other 'negative role models' in prevention and educational programmes for young people?
- 2) Which theories and/or models are applicable to a potential (positive or negative) impact of using ex-prisoners and other negative role models?

If we were able to find enough relevant and adequate empirical studies for the first research question, we would try to answer the following additional questions:

- a) What is known about the effect of using ex-prisoners and other negative role models on later involvement in delinquent behaviour and on attitudes about delinquent behaviour?
- b) What is known about the effect on knowledge and insight into the lives and experiences of ex-prisoners and on attitudes towards ex-prisoners and other negative role models?
- c) Is there something known about the significance of implementation modalities (such as intensity and content of the programme, type of negative role model)?
- d) Is there something known about the role of age of the recipients of the programme?
- e) Is there something known about differences between short-term effects (directly after the programme) and long-term effects (about one to several years)?

In addition, we were also interested in the following themes:

- f) The impact of the interventions on attitudes towards police and authority figures;
- g) Possible effects (positive or negative) for the role models themselves;
- h) Whether the interventions and/or studies are motivated by a specific theory (assumed processes or causes);

- l) Whether interventions may have more or less impact on vulnerable or at-risk youths;
- j) Whether something is known about the effects on different forms of delinquent behaviour;
- k) Whether the programme descriptions include information about why an ex-prisoner would have an effect.

Methods

We conducted two substudies. To answer the first research question, we performed a systematic literature review by searching as extensively as possible for publications concerning the deployment of ex-prisoners in the framework of prevention of delinquent behaviour among young people. For the second research question, we explored the theoretical literature by searching for relevant theories, within the fields of criminology, psychology, and communication science, that can offer clues for possible processes by which the use of ex-prisoners may or may not contribute to the prevention of delinquent behaviour.

Systematic literature review

We searched with clearly defined criteria and keywords in 21 search engines and 4 additional databases. Initially, we found 3423 possibly relevant references and 156 additional publications via cross-referencing and targeted internet searches for possibly relevant prevention and educational programmes. The primary objective was to find evaluation studies of sufficient scientific quality. After a thorough search of all the references, it appeared that only one of the studies met the criteria for a comprehensive evaluation. On the basis of a narrative review, we were able to get an impression of experiences with and appreciation of a few projects. These impressions are based on studies of relatively low quality about projects primarily based on using ex-prisoners or former at-risk youths. We also discussed a number of more general review studies in which the use of 'negative role models' was examined together with other interventions, and we made an inventory of Dutch and non-Dutch educational and prevention programmes, that used ex-prisoners or other negative role models and were focused on young people.

A first conclusion is that ex-offenders and other negative role models are regularly used in prevention and also mentoring programmes for young people. The programme EPJO alone was executed on 80 schools in Amsterdam over the past years and is now expanding to other parts of the Netherlands. In addition, we found in our research nine other Dutch projects in which ex-offenders or other young people with problem behaviour are still or have been used to prevent delinquent behaviour among young people.

A second conclusion is that those involved in prevention and educational programmes and authors of general review studies mention a variety of reasons to substantiate the use of negative role models. The most common reason for organisations to use negative role models in educational programmes is the idea that they are seen as 'real' or 'authentic', which would make them have more impact on young people. Also, many authors assume that there is a deterring effect of stories about the negative consequences of criminal behaviour. Finally, many authors argue that ex-prisoners and other negative

role models will be able to establish a better connection or relationship of trust with at-risk youths than other people. Authors from review studies mention similar arguments to justify their expectation that the use of negative role models could be beneficial.

A third conclusion must be, however, that despite the widespread use of negative role models and the belief in its positive effect, there is virtually no scientifically sound support for its assumed effectiveness at the moment. We found one study that meets the minimum requirements for good evaluations, the use of pre and post measurements and a control group. This single study was focused on the perception of ex-prisoners among young people instead of behavioural effects, and provides no base for evaluating effectiveness with respect to crime prevention. In short, there is a serious gap in our scientific knowledge.

A fourth conclusion, on the other hand, is that the available literature also shows that young people, as well as prevention staff, describe the use of ex-offenders and 'negative role models' as a positive experience. Young people appreciate their authenticity and indicate that their view on problem behaviour is changed. Yet, the extent to which effects are actually present and enduring, is absent in the literature.

A fifth conclusion is that we cannot satisfactorily answer the earlier formulated additional questions about the use of ex-prisoners and other negative role models. There is no reliable empirical material available on the basic effect itself, let alone that we can say something about short- versus long-term effects, effects on attitudes and knowledge/understanding, implementation modalities and the role of age. Again, further empirical research is needed. The only aspect of which any reliable empirical material was available is about how young people perceive ex-prisoners. From the earlier mentioned, somewhat dated, study we found that most of the respondents became more prejudiced towards ex-prisoners, and that the programme had a desired effect on only a small group of young people

A sixth conclusion relates to the available information offered by the programmes themselves. The information on their websites was usually brief; it sometimes even failed to give a clear description of the programme, usually did not mention how many times it was carried out, at how many schools/agencies, and which age category was targeted. Besides, it was not always clear how often an ex-prisoner or other negative role model was used; in some projects they seem to have a more prominent role than in other programmes. Finally, in none of the programme descriptions we found references made to theories that may substantiate or describe the effect of using negative role models.

Theoretical exploration

In the second part of the research, we explored which theories and models might be relevant. We discussed six different approaches from criminology, psychology and communication science, examined their empirical status using narrative systematic reviews and meta-analyses, and examined what these theories and models mean for the use of ex-prisoners and negative role models in prevention programmes.

A first conclusion from this substudy was that many of the processes and mechanisms that are suggested in practice can be connected to existing theoretical perspectives. The idea that the use of ex-offenders can have a deterring effect fits the deterrence theory from criminology. Social learning

approaches and the theory of reasoned action/planned behaviour match the use of ex-prisoners and negative role models to change young people's view on the potential gains and losses and the moral value of delinquent behaviour. We find the 'role model' principle of the discussed prevention programs in the prototype willingness model, and the importance of authenticity, credibility. The presumed expertise of ex-prisoners and negative role models might be substantiated with the elaboration likelihood model and source credibility model. Finally, the narrative imagery model fits the idea that the stories of ex-prisoners are effective because they are so touching and identifiable.

A second conclusion from the theory exploration is that the hypotheses and assumed processes are not equally plausible when the available empirical status of the matching theories are taken into account. For the hypothesized effectiveness through deterrence, little support is found in the literature on deterrence theory. Also, the notion that young people learn or imitate positive attitudes and behaviour from ex-prisoners and other negative role models is uncertain because of the limited intensity and duration of the contact in most educational programmes in schools. There may be imitation or change via the 'prototype' of negative role models, but the question then remains what exactly young people are going to imitate. They may even get a more positive image of previous criminal behaviour of former lawbreakers. The mechanisms derived from the elaboration likelihood model, source credibility model, and the narrative imagery seem to be the most plausible processes that may lead to an effect. Previous empirical research suggests that ex-prisoners and negative role models may contribute to the credibility and expertise of the messenger, and young people may be able to identify with the stories told by them in such a way that it has a stronger and long-lasting effect than conventional forms of education.

A third conclusion from the theoretical exploration could be that the effects are probably not equally strong for all subgroups. The exploration suggests that negative role models are more convincing if they are more similar to their audience. This means that fewer effects might be expected from educational programmes that target broad groups of younger adolescents and elementary school students than for high school students in the peak age of problem behaviour and for high-risk young people or already delinquent persons. However, these are still hypotheses that need to be tested in research.

Answering the research questions

The first main research question was: What is known about the effects of using ex-prisoners and other negative role models in prevention and educational programmes for young people? The answer is straightforward that very little is known about it, despite the broad use of negative role models in different programmes inside and outside the Netherlands. We only found four evaluation studies of which only one used pre and post measurements and a control group.

Thus, we cannot say much about the different subquestions that we hoped to answer if we found enough studies. For subquestion (a), about the effects of the deployment of ex-prisoners and negative role models on later involvement in delinquent behaviour, and attitudes towards delinquent behaviour, we could not find specific empirical material. Concerning sub-question b), about the effects on knowledge, understanding, and attitudes towards ex-prisoners, qualitative material seems to suggest that involved students and instructors are positive about this aspect. However, the available quantitative study appears to report mainly no positive effect. With regards to subquestion (c), on

various possible outcomes of different implementation modalities, even less is known, but we have observed that there is a lot of variation in how deployment of ex-prisoners and other negative role models is implemented in practice, even though it is not always clear how this is executed.

Concerning subquestions d) and e), about any differences in effect by age and short- versus long-term, and for most of the additional points of attention, we can say nothing on the basis of current empirical research. We can only say a few words about the justification of various interventions. Frequently something is written in the program descriptions about the reasons why ex-offenders could have an impact on young people who participate in the educational programme. Mainly the deterrence effect is mentioned, together with the presumed effectiveness of the authenticity of the messenger. None of the programmes, however, are explicitly based on theories from criminology, psychology or communication science.

The second central research question was: Which theories and/or models are applicable to a potential (positive or negative) impact of using ex-prisoners? We found six approaches with multiple theories and models which can be linked to potential processes that may explain potential effects of using ex-prisoners: deterrence theory; social learning approaches; the theory of reasoned action / planned behaviour; the prototype willingness model; the source credibility model and the estimation likelihood model, and the transportation-imagery model from the narrative approach. From the description of these theories and overviews about the empirical status of it, we concluded that particularly the experienced authenticity, credibility, and expertise of ex-prisoners and negative role models and the real-life nature and identifiability of stories may lead to a beneficial effect on theoretical grounds. However, we also expected that these effects are more likely for young people who are older and more similar to the negative role models. For the often assumed deterrent effect of using ex-prisoners, we found little empirical support.

Recommendation

The most important recommendation that follows from our literature review is that it is now essential to conduct methodologically sound evaluation studies of programs in which ex-prisoners and other negative role models are used. There is a fundamental lack of studies of sufficient quality, while in the meantime a large number of programmes in which negative role models play a prominent role is carried out or in preparation. It is currently still unclear whether these kinds of educational or prevention programmes are able to achieve the desired effect.

A sound empirical study should at least contain pre and post measurements of delinquent behaviour and attitudes of young people taking part in an educational or prevention programme in which ex-offenders or other negative role models are used. In addition, such a study may also investigate to what extent the knowledge of and attitudes about ex-prisoners, police and authority figures change, and what ex-offenders experience themselves before, during, and after their participation in prevention activities. Furthermore, a control group should be added that is similar in size and characteristics to the group that will participate in the programme. Given the different modalities and intensities of the existing programmes, it is necessary to provide a design that can filter the specific effect of using ex-prisoners from the more general effects of information and education. One could think of putting together different experimental groups where one does and the other does not get information by ex-prisoners or negative role models, or in a different order. Further, it would be ideal

to also be able to examine long-term effects, as well as differences between younger and older adolescents.

On theoretical grounds, there is reason to assume that the use of ex-offenders and other negative role models may have a beneficial preventive effect (but a counterproductive effect is also conceivable); in the available research a beneficial effect has not yet been demonstrated. Further, on theoretical and empirical grounds there is reason to expect stronger effects for older adolescents and/or at-risk youths than for the general population and relatively young adolescents and children. The current broad application of the instrument calls for a more thorough justification of using ex-prisoners in educational and prevention programmes and of the broad population that is currently targeted.